

LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIVISION

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Audit Committee Members

FROM: Jim Pellegrini, Deputy Legislative Auditor, Performance Audits

DATE: October 6, 1999

RE: **Follow-up to Performance Audit:
Noxious Weed Program (96P-13)
Montana Department of Agriculture
Montana Department of Transportation**

INTRODUCTION

We issued our performance audit, Noxious Weed Program, in June 1997. The report included two recommendations for the Department of Agriculture (MDA) and one recommendation to the Department of Transportation (MDT). We received an audit recommendation implementation status from MDA in July 1998 and from MDT in October 1998. Since the MDT recommendation proposed revising statute, we waited for the results of the 1999 Legislative Session to finalize our follow-up report.

SUMMARY

MDA's recommendations related to increasing: 1) training activities, and 2) the use of the Noxious Weed Trust Fund (NWTF) while decreasing application process complexity. Overall, the department has met the intent of these two recommendations. The MDT recommendation related to revising legislation to: 1) eliminate processing weed control expenditure documentation, and 2) provide weed district funding at the beginning of fiscal years. The department has partially implemented this recommendation.

<u>Recommendation Status</u>	
Implemented	2
Partially Implemented	<u>1</u>
Total	3

In the following paragraphs, we discuss the implementation status of the report's three recommendations in more detail.

Prior Recommendation #1

We recommend the Department of Agriculture:

- A. *Establish long-term goals for training to include weed supervisors, weed board members, and county commissioners.*
- B. *Develop training objectives for administering weed management programs and improving management practices.*
- C. *Prepare administrative rules for the level and type of weed supervisor training.*
- D. *Establish procedures which allow weed district officials and project sponsors to apply for NWTF grants to help pay for training to develop management plans and improve management practices.*

This recommendation is implemented.

The MDA conducted a number of courses reflecting recently established training goals and objectives.

Administrative rules for weed supervisors were adopted effective July 1998.

The department did not develop specific procedures for applying for management plan funding. However, during the annual Noxious Weed Management Advisory Council meetings, the council has encouraged NWTF participants to request funding for plan development through the standard grant application process. Further, the council has approved funding for management plan training.

Prior Recommendation #2

We recommend the Department of Agriculture increase NWTF participation by:

- A. *Establishing procedures to facilitate cooperative cost-share grants including assessments of non-participating counties to determine the potential for weed control projects.*
- B. *Developing procedures for selected special county grants to reduce paperwork to a minimal requirement.*
- C. *Developing procedures to use NWTF funds to provide additional administrative support to potential sponsors of cooperative cost-share projects.*

This recommendation is implemented.

Currently, MDA tracks counties which have not participated in cost-share projects. In addition, the department's noxious weed staff have identified potential projects for consideration in these counties, and the State's Weed Coordinator has helped to develop cost-share projects in some of these counties.

The department revised the application/contract for selected special county grants, reducing the paperwork to a one-page format. Requirements for quarterly and annual reports were also eliminated.

During annual Noxious Weed Management Advisory Council meetings, the council has allowed the inclusion of administrative costs in the grant application/approval process. In addition, the grant guidelines for 1999 indicate project administrative costs may be included as long as documentation justification for actual time involved is reflected in the application.

Prior Recommendation #3

We recommend the Department of Transportation:

- A. *Seek legislation to reflect fiscal year distribution of state/federal funding to weed districts and eliminate the requirement for weed districts to submit weed control expenditure documentation to the department for reimbursement.*
- B. *Develop procedures for distributing state/federal right-of-way (ROW) weed control funding to weed districts at the beginning of each fiscal year.*

This recommendation is partially implemented.

Although MDT initially indicated the intent to propose legislation in this area, other department priorities prevailed. As a result, the department did not seek legislation regarding fiscal year distribution of funding or elimination of the requirement for submission of expenditures by weed districts. However, in a joint effort with county weed district officials, the department has standardized the process for the annual allocation of funding to ensure all counties are aware of a budgeted amount at the beginning of each year.

CONCLUSION

We do not recommend additional audit work at this time. However, the concerns addressed in our audit findings for the MDT recommendation remain unresolved. In the audit report, we noted existing procedures neither increase fiscal controls nor improve weed control effectiveness. The department should re-examine the need for legislation for the next legislative session.

Job Number - 00SP-14

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cc: Ralph Peck, Director, Department of Agriculture
Marv Dye, Director, Department of Transportation